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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000483

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TAGS: PREL PBTS PREF UNSC WI MO AG

SUBJECT: ALGERIA AND POLISARIO SLAM WESTERN SAHARA ENVOY
VAN WALSUM AND THE AMERICAN POSITION, TOO

REF: SECSTATE 43370

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In separate meetings April 27 and 28, Ambassador and DCM delivered reftel demarche to the Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to the Polisario ambassador in Algiers. The two recipients shared the same reaction to the recent statement of UNSG Special Envoy Peter Van Walsum, saying he had lost credibility and could not continue to serve the role of impartial moderator. Both professed themselves "shocked" by what they saw as the clear U.S. decision to take sides, and told us that a referendum was the only way to reach a solution to the Western Sahara impasse. Imposing a decision, they said, would be a "waste of time" and would not encourage regional stability. From our vantage point in Algiers, we are not sure if the Polisario would accept to attend a fifth round of talks under Van Walsum's stewardship; it seems unlikely that Algeria would encourage them to accept. End Summary.

A CLEAR U.S. MESSAGE

¶2. (C) Ambassador met with MFA Director General (Assistant Secretary equivalent) for African Affairs Ismail Chergui on

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April 27 to discuss reftel demarche. (Chergui had told us he would be our designated interlocutor for Western Sahara issues - see ref B.) DCM delivered the same message to Polisario Ambassador Ibrahim Ghali the morning of April 28. In both meetings, we stressed that independence is not a realistic option and that negotiations must work towards a mutually acceptable solution of autonomy within the context of Moroccan sovereignty. We told both officials that the unstable Sahel situation compelled regional actors to reinforce stability, which would not be served by adding a new, weak state to the equation. We extended an invitation to the Polisario to visit Washington at a high level, to discuss how to move forward, and reminded both that we would welcome a constructive proposal from the Polisario. Ambassador underlined to Chergui that the U.S. genuinely wants better relations between Morocco and Algeria but the Western Sahara issue seems to block any steps forward.

ALGERIA: SHOCKED BY VAN WALSUM ACTIONS

¶13. (C) Chergui told the Ambassador he was surprised by the "illegal way" in which Van Walsum produced his own independent paper. "He broke the rules," Chergui claimed, saying that Van Walsum should have stuck to the line of the Secretary General. Chergui said that by taking sides, Van

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Walsum "has no more credibility" and probably cannot continue in his job. Chergui added that this was not Algeria's decision, and that we should ask the Polisario about Van Walsum's future. Chergui added that Algeria was "surprised" by the statement of U.S. Ambassador to the UN in support of Van Walsum's statement, accusing the U.S. of taking sides as well. He cautioned that it was dangerous for the U.S. and its image that the U.S. role should be "to try and make the UN work properly." Chergui called it "dangerous" to create precedents, especially in Africa, believing the push toward autonomy could destabilize the region. In conclusion, Chergui clarified that the Algerian position has never been "independence" but rather "self-determination," and if the Sahrawis chose autonomy on their own rather than having it imposed from outside, this would be acceptable to Algeria. This Algerian position, he stated, was the only one consistent with international law.

POLISARIO: VAN WALSUM'S ARE "YOUR IDEAS"

¶14. (C) Polisario Ambassador to Algeria Ibrahim Ghali, not surprisingly, responded to the DCM on April 28 with many of the same arguments heard the day before from Chergui. Ghali, diplomatic but dour, initially took pains to make it clear

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that the Polisario would "never" reject dialogue with the U.S., despite its dismay with the current U.S. position. Ghali told us the Polisario "could not believe the U.S., with all of its history and values, could confiscate the right of a people to choose their destiny at the ballot box." In response to the points given in the demarche, Ghali replied that the Polisario knew that Van Walsum's ideas "were your ideas," and that now the U.S. had formally taken sides, "showing us you are obstructing international efforts to resolve the conflict." Ghali said that he did not think Van Walsum could continue his work, as "he has lost our confidence," but he noted that before either party formally considered whether Van Walsum could continue, it appeared he had already recused himself on his own through his statement.

¶15. (C) On the subject of regional stability, Ghali stressed that the Polisario did not want to destabilize anyone, "as Morocco says." Calling the Sahrawis "a small but proud people," Ghali asserted the Polisario was ready to fight terrorism and cooperate with all of its neighbors towards this end, including Morocco. "You can buy our cooperation," he said, "we are a small people."

POTHOLE ON THE ROAD AHEAD

¶16. (C) Both Ghali and Chergui cautioned that imposing a solution without a referendum risked destabilizing the region and radicalizing the Polisario, with Ghali going so far as to warn against "pushing the Sahrawis to become another Hamas." While both officials stressed that autonomy would be acceptable if approved in a popular referendum, Ghali said that he "could not imagine" a referendum featuring choices that did not include independence. Chergui, who has served in Morocco during his diplomatic career, said that Algeria

wanted a "strong and stable" Morocco on its borders, but that imposing autonomy on the Sahrawis would run counter to this goal. "One day, Morocco will pay for this autonomy," Chergui warned, "it will dismantle their country." Chergui stressed his belief that in the end, "neither the U.S. nor Algeria" can choose for the Sahrawis, so any approach that did not include a referendum was "merely wasting time." Each time the Ambassador reminded Chergui that dangling independence was not a realistic way forward, Chergui brushed it aside. Near the end of our meeting Chergui urged the U.S. to stop using the word 'realism' when discussing the Western Sahara.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) From our vantage point in Algiers, a fifth round of Manhasset negotiations, at least with Van Walsum in the moderator's chair, appears in doubt given that both our Algerian and Polisario contacts say they have lost confidence in him after his recent report. Ghalil thanked us for the invitation to send a Polisario delegation to Washington, and said he would transmit the invitation to Polisario leadership and get back to us.

¶8. (C) As we noted ref B, the MFA's Chergui is a thorough professional with excellent connections at the Ministry and in the broader government. We know him well from collaboration on Sahel issues. Algerian MFA ambassadors like Chergui and Abdallah Baali are the friendly face of the Algerian government. As such, their reactions to our evolving stance on the Western Sahara are relatively mild. Other Algerian officials are far less polished. We likely will hear some fairly blunt public criticism from them as our position becomes clearer in the public domain.

FORD